

LOCAL

Barrington council resists adding parking near right-of-ways; denies 'classist plot'

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Should the public expect to be able to park near public right-of-ways?

Many on the Barrington Town Council don't think so.

During an hourlong discussion that led to some contentious exchanges on Monday night, three out of five council members pushed back against the notion that the town has some obligation to ensure that people can park near waterfront access points.

"Under the logic that I'm hearing, the idea is if we have a hiking trail, well, someone benefits from living near that trail," said councilman Carl P. Kustell. "Therefore, we have to create parking around the trail."

That reasoning doesn't hold up, Kustell argued, because homeowners pay for their proximity to parks, beaches and other amenities through their taxes.

He suggested that allowing more parking near the shoreline in residential neighborhoods could lead to "gridlock traffic" and "would fundamentally change the town."

Barrington's parking restrictions began drawing scrutiny this summer after Ken Block, the former gubernatorial candidate, grew frustrated by the difficulty of taking his dog to the beach.

Tilly, a Goldendoodle, likes to play on a stretch of sand that can be reached via several public access points in the Nayatt neighborhood — but parking is banned on nearly every street in a one-mile radius, Block found.

Barrington officials responded by pledging to conduct a comprehensive review of the town's ordinances, and spent several months measuring roads to determine which ones were wide enough to accommodate parked cars.

Ultimately, Barrington's fire chief identified 20 streets where parking could theoretically be added, Town Manager James Cunha told the council on Monday.

However, Cunha said that he'd also used "subjective criteria" to decide that some parking bans should stay, due to "quality of life" concerns.

He recommended that the council remove parking restrictions from 13 of the streets on the list, while keeping bans in place for seven others — including several near Barrington Beach, like Chachapacasset Road, Governor Bradford Drive and Highland Avenue.

The proposed changes would open up parking on Bay Spring Avenue, which has a public right-of-way leading to Bullock Cove, and on Blanding Avenue, near a waterfront playground.

However, they wouldn't create any new public parking spaces near right-of-ways in the Nayatt neighborhood, where there's the most demand.

Block told the council that he didn't understand the logic of creating public access points to the shore — and spending nearly \$20,000 on granite markers — but then issuing parking bans that prevent most residents from using them.

He suggested he'd be satisfied with as few as a half-dozen parking spots, which could potentially be limited to Barrington residents or those who have purchased beach stickers.

"We don't have to do this in a way that's disruptive," he said. "There's all manner of compromises that could be made."

Council President Michael Carroll pushed back, saying it was "unfair" to suggest that access was being restricted. The town provides plenty of parking at Barrington Beach, and people are free to walk down to the right-of-ways from there, he said.

"We didn't design those right-of-ways as access to the beach," he said. "We designed the beach as the best place to park."

The beach is only open to Barrington residents during the summer, and Block argued that the parking lot frequently fills up. He questioned why some streets in the Nayatt neighborhood are considered too narrow to allow parking, yet residents and their guests park there anyway and don't get ticketed.

"There shouldn't effectively be two classes of citizens," he said.

Block also asked why the town had decided that streets need to be at least 26 feet wide to accommodate parking, yet there was no talk of banning parking on the many other streets around town that are narrower than that.

Councilman Jacob N.S. Brier raised a similar point, asking if there was a risk that Barrington was "recognizing that we have many unsafe streets throughout town, and not doing anything about it."

Brier, the only member of the council to push back on Cunha's recommendations, said that he'd also like more information about what went into the town manager's decision-making. He suggested that it would be worth consulting with a traffic engineer, which the town has yet to do.

Other council members struck a more defensive tone.

"The idea that this is some kind of classist plot — I think it is really over the top and really inappropriate," Kutsell said.

Kutsell, an attorney, said that he wanted to "address what I think is an unfair attack on the town's reputation." He launched into what felt like a cross-examination of Block, ultimately suggesting that Block was more concerned about rules limiting dogs on the beach than about parking — "but that wouldn't be as interesting, in terms of an article for the Boston Globe."

Councilwoman Annelise Conway similarly maintained that "nobody has restricted anybody's access to the beach."

Conway acknowledged that she lives on Bluff Road, one of the streets in the Nayatt neighborhood where parking is banned. She said that one of reasons she chose her house was because of the public right-of-way at the end of the road that would allow her to walk onto the beach.

In many other communities, she said, neighbors would have planted shrubs or found other ways to block the right-of-way, "and that is actually limiting access."

The council ultimately voted to move forward with Cunha's recommendations, and hold a hearing to get public input.

Besides Block, few other members of the public testified during the Monday night meeting. But one woman who was there to discuss a different issue stood up after witnessing the parking discussion, and told the councilors that she was "flabbergasted" by their reluctance

"The resistance is disturbing, really," she said. "This is just really embarrassing."

Block, after the meeting, said that he agreed.

"It's a shameful display," he said. "People are going to have speak up."